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ABSTRACT

Communication theorists now concerned with developing better intercultural interactions are suggesting movement from an approach that has been purely analytical to one that is holistic. American society is at a stage where is must move from "dichotomization" to a more humanistic approach that involves unconditional positive regard for others, as well as activity that is indicative of such heightened awareness. Too often communication channels break down within American institutions when there is a call for an assessment of racial bias, and questioning erupts as to what degree racism is upheld through institutional policy. Institutional racism is an unavoidable experience for nearly all people living in America. Even those who function as the oppressors eventually fall as victims of such a system. Institutional racism demands conscious counter movement in order to maintain law and order in a culturally diverse society. Racism is systematic, and at some level, it is conscious. People of European descent may feel they are being attacked when racism is mentioned. In modern America, people of African descent often avoid discussing racism for a variety of reasons. Without a doubt, preparation for developing a forum to discuss institutional racism is a time-consuming affair. What is needed to make it work is a conscientious willingness to be sensitive to the needs of the people who participate in such a forum, which would be an intellectually and emotionally stimulating experience as well. (ABL)

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Luis South

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION:

A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO THE ISSUE OF RACISM

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to analyze different perspectives that may actually arise when attempting to develop a viable forum for intercultural exchange within a multicultural environment where there is a political structure predominated by people of European ancestry. Too often communication channels break down within American institutions when there is a call for an assesment of racial bias, and questioning erupts as to what degree is racism upheld through institutional policy.

Telesis, a new word added to the English language, is defined as: The future intelligently planned. In America, it is impossible to have telesis without intercultural understanding. In order to advance humanity American educators must take the cognitive domain and blend it with an affective approach. Dr. James P. Comer of Yale University states:

*"Teaching and learning are too often considered mechanical processes.... [There is] widespread perception of learning as a mechanical cognitive function--- as opposed to a cognitive and affective process that involves relationships and development."

All too often our communication is conveyed mechanically, as if in a vacuum. The world at large plays an important part in the communication process. If we forget to be aware of that consideration we very often miss out.

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*Comer, James (1988) "Is parenting essential to good teaching?" National Education Association Today Magazine: Special Edition (Jan. 1988).Pp. 34-40

Communication theorists now concerned with developing better intercultural interactions are suggesting that we move from an approach that has been purely analytical to one that is holistic. American society is at a stage where it must move from "dichotomization" to a more humanistic approach that involves unconditional positive regard for others, as well as activity that is indicative of such heightened awareness.

How does mankind approach the idea of dealing with his environment? What method do we consider most appropriate? One that seeks to adjust the environment to man's subjective view of what should be; or, should man conform to changes in his environment? In order to confront these questions it is possible to tailor our rhetoric by asking the question: What strategy should be employed in order to develop or modernize society?

In one of his essays Njoku E. Awa mentions that the terms development and modernization are synonymous but are viewed differently by each of the social sciences (e.g. economics, sociology, social anthropology, psychology, and political science).

*"Two definitions, one of development, the other of modernization, seem to offer a common notion of what the process involves. Development, according to Ceplow and Finsterbusch (1964), is the process by which a society improves its "control of the environment" by means of increasingly sophisticated technologies applied by increasingly "complex organizations." Modernization in Black's (1966:7) words, "may be defined as the process by which historically evolved institutions are adapted to the rapidly changing functions that reflect the unprecedented increase in man's knowledge, permitting control over his environment," that accompanied the scientific revolution. Both of these definitions emphasize man's ability to shape the forces of his environment to suit his purpose."

Awa goes on to state that Rogers (1969) made a distinction between development (viewing it as a <u>social</u> system change requiring a macroanalytic approach) and modenization (which he viewed as <u>individual</u> level change that necessitates a microanalytic procedure).

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*Awa, Njoku E.(1979) "Ethnocentric bias in development research," Handbook of Intercultural Communication. Beverly Hills: Sage Publication Inc.

In continuing Awa conjectures:

"However, the purpose of the distinction between development and modernization is somewhat compromised by Roger's (1969:7) claim that the former term is interchangeable with differentiation, integration, or adaptation, the latter with adoption, acculturation, or learning."

Awa, by analyzing the definitions of modernization and development, illuminates a dilema prevalent among those who go through higher education. As students graduate from college and go out into the world to live life, it is typical to experience a feeling of being out of sync. We are filled with theory and know not how to apply it in the real world.

Edward T. Hall (1976:34) clearly identifies the root cause of the problem.

*"The danger is that real-life problems are dismissed while philosophical and theoretical systems are treated as real. I see this everyday in my students. It has been my experience that after students have spent sixteen or more years in our education

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*Hall, E.T. (1976) Beyond Culture. Garden City, N.Y. Anchor Press/ Double Day.

system they have been so brainwashed that it is impossible to get them to go out and simply observe and report back what they heard, what they felt, or what went on before their eyes. Most of them are helpless in the face of real life, because they have to know beforehand what they are going to discover and have a theory or hypothesis to test. Why? Because that is the way they have been taught."

In commenting on the above statement William S. Howell responds:

*"If Hall is accurate in his observation that Western education produces scholars who can use only analytical approaches and procedures, then theory building requires major revision if it is to cope with global communication phenomena."

Applying much of the theory learned in a college setting may give the feeling of being somewhat disconnected from reality. A sign of intelligence, some theorists postulate (Binet, Simon, Piaget, et al), has everything to do with the individual's ability to adapt to their environment.

The following is an approach, by one college graduate, to the issue of racism that is intended to bring people of different persuasions together for intellectual and emotional sharing in order to create stronger bonds, thereby producing a more efficient institutional environment.

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*Howell, William. (1979) "Theoretical directions for intercultural communication," Handbook of Intercultural Communication. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications Inc.

Institutional racism is an unavoidable experience for nearly all people living in America. Even those who function as the oppressors eventually fall as victims of such a system. Institutional racism is a factor that demands conscious counter movement in order to maintain law and order in a culturally diverse society. By definition racism is a belief system that superimposes superiority and inferiority complexes upon a general population that includes people who look different to varying degrees. In a historical context racism connotes European genocidal tendencies and domination of a system that includes people of African descent. By its very nature racism requires buying into a lie.

In present day America the problem is getting people focused to communicate openly regarding this issue. Even people basically of the same extraction have a difficult time agreeing on how to confront this problem. As a consequence, people, for the most part, don't discuss it. Many of us live in a world of denial.

People of European descendency may feel that they're being

attacked when the word racism is mentioned. Sometimes there's reason to believe that people from Third World cultures use the word racism indiscriminately in order to avoid dealing with other harsh reality. So, to be fair, we can say that priorities are sometimes different. The most prevalent inaccuracy is the belief that racism is merely a matter of individuals not getting along with each other, or not adapting well to their environment.

Racism has two inherent factors: it is systematic, and at some level, it is conscious. Individual psychosis is certainly the driving force behind institutional racism, but individual racists need an institution to work through. One person or a few could never render an institution helpless. It is the tolerance among many that allow racists to entrench themselves. To be clear, racists are violators of other's human rights. There is nothing haphazzard about how a racist state runs.

As stated before, the mere mention of the word stirs inner emotions. Most American adults have had some experience with racism in their background. Still it is often difficlt to get people to publicly share their experiences and perspectives on this subject. People often choose silence or engage in constructing facades. Though convenient, it is this noncommunicative mindset that serves the purpose of no

growth--- even decay--- that exists within many American institutions. The effects of racism is best determined through the examination of statistical analysis. Over a period of time, numbers continue to follow a trend. People who are racially different are consistently denied access to equal sharing in the economy; this fits the understanding of it being systematic.

In modern America people of African descent often avoid discussing racism for a variety of reasons. Again, just as in people of European descent, there is a set of dormant emotions underlying this topic. On one extreme there's a sense of impotence and frustration that we share with our forefathers who lived through the inhumanity of slavery. To the other extreme we may have experienced publicly discussing this topic with others only to find a no gain situation as an end result. Why bother with talk if it only serves as a waste of time?

Without a doubt, preparation for developing a forum to discuss institutional racism is a time consuming affair. Those who endeavor to set up such a thing must not only be organized, but great risk takers as well. People who organize should develop the capacity to introspect, always searching to understand their own cultural biases. What can make it work is the conscientious

willingness to be sensitive to the needs of the people who participate, as well as being intellectually and emotionally stimulating. In time the sense of growth will lead each participant to serve in a more cooperative fashion.

Maybe some college students do garner information in such a way that they can have an impact in this world. We can be excellent observers and reporters. We can be an effective part of the change process. Stating this clearly helps the process.

In conclusion, William S. Howell addresses this idea best:

*"Until we include elements of creativity that most of the world's people know to be the essence of interpersonal communication in our conceptualization of that process, our theory will continue to be an insufficient one..... Reframing intercultural communication by conceptualizing it as a creative act rather than as a mechanical process is only a beginning."

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* Howell, William.(1979) "Theoretical directions for intercultural communication." Handbook of Intercultural Communication. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.

AFTERWORD

I must mention that throughout the writing of this essay I consciously refrained from using the terms "White" or "Black", I instead chose to refer to the cultural background that people may come from by using the terms "European" and "African." This comes out of an awareness that we may be feeding into the belief that color of skin (often very inaccurate) is an adequate descriptor of a person's character. Also, the word minority is never used. In many localities Third World people hold a very strong majority. The word minority simply undermines a correct political perspective.

This is the very beginning of a lifelong study. Work will not cease until death; before that time we can work out a suitable formula to counteract racial hatred. All communication would be very much appreciated.

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